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RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ FEB 0406
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA IMMEDIATE 3718
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS IMMEDIATE 2359
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA IMMEDIATE 0685
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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 000347

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/06/2014
TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [MOPS](#) [SNAR](#) [PTER](#) [EC](#)
SUBJECT: MOD DEATH - MECHANICAL FAILURE RULED OUT; MILITARY
TAKES BLAME

REF: A. QUITO 00211
[1](#)B. QUITO 00280

Classified By: PolOff Jarahn Hillsman, Reasons 1.4 (b&d)

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: The congressional investigatory commission studying the helicopter collision that killed former MinDef Guadalupe Larriva and her daughter on January 24 announced on February 7 that human error, not technical malfunction nor any kind of deliberate conspiracy, was to blame for the crash which killed seven. Unofficial statements from members of the mixed GOE/international commission also investigating the crash support Congress' conclusions, rejecting allegations of foul play. Former Acting MinDef Ricardo Patino, speaking on behalf of President Correa, has publicly faulted the military for making a series of errors that led to Larriva's death. Four high-ranking military officers have been removed thus far, and more dismissals are expected. End Summary.

Congress Faults Human Error

[1](#)2. (U) The Ecuadorian congressional commission investigating the accidental death of former Minister of Defense Guadalupe Larriva on February 7 issued a report faulting human error. Commission president Luis Alemedia (PSC) told the press that after extensive interviews with aviation specialists, the commission had found no evidence that mechanical or structural failure, or foul play, had caused the crash. The commission had concluded human error was to blame for the crash, and the official investigation should continue to determine the exact human cause of the crash. Congress would move legislation to "clarify the responsibility of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," he said.

International Commission Rules Out Technical Failure

[1](#)3. (U) Meanwhile, members of the mixed GOE/international commission investigating the crash have also publicly revealed that the accident was likely not caused by mechanical or structural failure. According to press reports, French technicians participating in the investigation inspected the motors of the French-made Gazelle helicopters and determined that they were likely functioning when the two helicopters collided. Commission head Leonardo Barreiro said that while the exact cause of the crash remains unknown, the commission was closely studying the

pilots' use of night vision goggles. An alleged order from the Manta airport watchtower requesting the helicopters hold position while a civilian aircraft departed the runway is also being investigated. The final report is due in March.

14. (U) Socialist party delegate to the international investigatory commission, Trotsky Serrano, told the press that technical experts had found no evidence of explosive devices or mechanical sabotage that would indicate foul play. Serrano also criticized military officials for allowing civilians to participate in experimental exercises.

Executive Faults Military; Fires Four Officials

15. (U) The Correa government, moving ahead of the official investigatory committee, has already publicly faulted the military for Larriva's death. Then-Acting Defense Minister Ricardo Patino on February 2 stated that three "human errors" committed by the military had caused the accident. He criticized the institution for allowing civilians to ride on armed attack helicopters used for demonstrations, adding that "someone should have warned Larriva of the dangers--especially at night."

16. (U) Patino said that military officials failed to ensure that the helicopters were flying in formation with a one-minute separation at all times, and noted that Larriva and her daughter should have been put in a Super Puma helicopter, as was called for in the original Ecuadorian Army operations plan for the demonstration. Based on these mistakes, Patino said, Correa had removed Army Commander Pedro Manchado, Army Aviation Commander at Puerto Lopez Colonel Rene Vasquez, Undersecretary of Defense General Gonzalo Meza, and Larriva's former advisor Colonel Ivan

Moreno from duty. Additional dismissals may come after the final accident report is released, Patino said.

Comment

17. (C) Congress' report and preliminary statements by the investigatory support our preliminary view that the accident was likely caused by pilot error. Patino's public blaming of the military in advance of the final accident report has caused resentment by some within the military, a political miscalculation that may cost Correa their loyalty in the future. The Army is particularly perturbed by the removal of Undersecretary Gonzalo Meza, who was widely respected. Our military sources report numerous verbal confrontations between Meza and Patino over the helicopter incident, and believe a personal vendetta was behind his removal.

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